The Everything I Have Lost
Teaching Guide

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The Everything I Have Lost
Author: Sylvia Zéleny
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Pre-Reading Information

Synopsis: Twelve-year-old Julia calls her diary her “everything,” so it makes sense that in her diary, she writes about everything: her family, her friends, her hopes and frustrations, and the fear and confusion that come with living in Juárez, “the city that steals cars, girls, and our dignity.” Julia struggles to understand the strange dynamics of her family: her mamá’s silences, her father’s long absences, the family’s frequent need to relocate. As both a writer and a young woman coming of age, Julia wants to uncover the truth that the adult world tries to keep hidden from her. When her father goes missing, she is not willing to add his name to the list of all she has lost. Instead, she sets out to find the truth about her father, her family, and herself.

Interest Level: Grades 7-10

Curriculum Standards: A list of applicable Common Core standards appears at the end of this guide.

Themes: coming of age, family, dealing with secrets, organized crime, issues surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border

Content-specific vocabulary:
- Bisabuela
- Las muertas de Juárez
- Mañanitas
- Narco
- Migra
- Comadreja
- Chanclas

Academic vocabulary:
- Dignity
- Fortress
- Tarot cards
- Opinionated
- Legislative
- Executive
- Federal

Curriculum Standards: A list of applicable Common Core standards appears at the end of this guide.

Themes: coming of age, family, dealing with secrets, organized crime, issues surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border
Teacher considerations: This book contains some adult language and themes. There is some minor sexual exploration between two child characters. Both child and adult characters use profanity (F-bombs are dropped), and some of the adult characters are clearly involved in organized crime. Some violence within the family is depicted (a mother slapping a daughter; relatives hitting each other), and street violence, which is something the characters live with every day, is discussed but not depicted graphically. The more “adult” elements of the story add to its realism; it makes sense that characters such as Julia and her brother would hear and see things that children in other situations would not encounter.

If some of the adult content is too potentially problematic, using excerpts from the book in the classroom could also work well. Since the novel is written as a diary, it is episodic, making it easy to pick out sections for discussion.

It is important for students to understand why Julia does not feel safe in the city she calls home

Anticipation guide: Juárez, Mexico, where Julia lives, is often cited as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. The murder rate in Juárez is almost unimaginably high. In 2019 alone, there were 1,499 homicides in the city. It is no wonder that in the novel, Julia and Willy are not allowed to ride bikes in the streets! The first reason for the high incidence of murder is that Juárez is a city with a disproportionately large number of people who make their money from the illegal drug trade, the “narcos” referred to in the novel. Because these drug traffickers are often in competition with each other, “wars” break out in which not only narcos are killed but also people who are “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The second reason for the high murder rate is both puzzling and disturbing. Since 1993, Juárez has been a major site for the gender-based murder of women and girls, a phenomenon so common the locals have given it its own name, femicide. Women and girls, especially ones from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are also often kidnapped and “disappeared” in Juárez, most often to be forced into human trafficking. A quick Google search of “Juárez murders” will pull up a great deal of information, much of it too graphic and upsetting to share with students in a middle school classroom. However, giving the students some background knowledge of Juárez’s violent history is useful in teaching the novel. It is important for students to understand why Julia does not feel safe in the city she calls home; it is also important later in the novel to understand how Julia’s father plays a role in making the streets of Juárez too dangerous for its citizens to navigate. Teachers should be careful to note that Juárez is a complex city with many positive aspects that often get overlooked due to its reputation for violence. There are further resources to help teachers engage students in discussion about stereotypes vs. complex identities in the “interdisciplinary connections” section of this guide.
Dear Diary Activity: *The Everything I Have Lost* is written as a series of diary entries. Ask students to practice keeping a diary about their daily lives as they read the book. Emphasize that this shouldn’t be written like a standard school assignment. Julia writes the way she talks; her diary is about self-expression and trying to make sense of the world around her. Their diaries should have the same qualities, reflecting their individual personalities and interests. Encourage students to write five diary entries over the course of their time reading the book. And of course, if they want to continue keeping a diary once they’re finished with the novel, that’s great!

Memory Jars Activity: This novel illustrates how loss is an inevitable part of life. Ask students to remember a person, pet, object, or place that they have lost or been separated from. Provide a mason jar in which they can collect items associated with the lost person or thing. The collection can include drawings or photographs, plus small objects that are meaningful mementos. For example, a jar devoted to a dog could contain a photo of the dog, the dog’s favorite brand of biscuit, the dog’s ID tag, a chewy toy, etc. This activity is inspired both by the theme of loss in the novel and by ofrendas, the shrines Mexican families make for the Day of the Dead to honor and celebrate deceased relatives. The memory jars can be displayed in the classroom, and students who are comfortable talking about their memory jars may do so in class.

Questions for close reading:

1. How would you describe Julia’s relationship with her mother? Is it a close relationship, a distant relationship, or a mixture of both? Give examples from the story to explain your answer.

2. What do you think it’s like to live in Juárez based on how Julia describes her experiences? Think about details in the story, such as what happens to the family’s car when they go to the movies.

3. In her diary, Julia uses some inappropriate language and talks about subjects that could be considered too “adult” for a girl of her age. Why do you think Julia’s language and topics often seem more “adult?”

4. Over the course of the story, Julia’s family experiences a lot of abrupt changes. One is the move from Juárez to El Paso. How is life in El Paso different for Julia than life in Juárez?

5. How is Bisabuela important in Julia’s life? How is Julia’s relationship with Bisabuela different from her relationship with her mamá and papá?

6. Who are some other characters, whether family or friends, who play important roles in Julia’s life? How do they either help or hurt her? Choose three characters to discuss.

7. Are there parts in the story where you became suspicious that Julia’s papá was involved in illegal activities? Give some examples from the story that made you suspicious.

8. Julia starts her diary because she wants to be a writer. Does she “want to be a writer,” or is she already a writer? Give reasons for your answer.
After-Reading Activities and Questions

Reader response questions:

1. Julia has many strong emotions as a result of her family situation. Did you ever find yourself getting angry or impatient with her, or did you think her times of anger or sadness were understandable? Why? Did you like her as a person?

2. Because Juárez is a dangerous city and Julia's dad engages in criminal activity, Julia and her family are often unsafe. How do you think you would feel if you lived in an unsafe environment? How would the daily lack of safety affect your relationships with other people?

3. Julia discovers over the course of the story that her father and his friend are dishonest and have been doing terrible things. How would you feel if you discovered that someone in your family or someone you were close to was doing something illegal or harmful?

4. *The Everything I Have Lost* deals with a lot of difficult, real-life issues and is emotionally hard to read at times. Do you think it's good for kids to be able to read books that tackle difficult issues? What are the benefits of reading stories like this one?

5. Julia writes in her diary because it helps her understand her life and makes her feel better. Is there any activity that always makes you feel better? If so, what is it?

Diary Activity: Since *The Everything I Have Lost* is written as Julia’s diary, we only get Julia’s point of view on the events that happen in the story. Choose another character from the story, and write a one-page diary entry from that character’s point of view. How would this character be feeling about the events that are happening? How might this character explain the choices they make?

Losses and Gains Activity: Working in a group of 3 to 5 people, make a list of all the things Julia loses over the course of the events in the story. Some of these things may be real physical objects, such as the family car. Others may be emotional losses, such as the loss of trust in her parents. After you’ve listed and discussed everything you can think of, answer this question: Does Julia gain anything over the course of the novel? If so, what is it? Answers for this will vary, so make sure everyone in the group gets a chance to talk.

Interdisciplinary connections (as appropriate)

Because this novel deals with real-life sociopolitical issues, it could be easily connected to a social studies unit.

The Danger of a Single Story: Many people are only familiar with the dangerous aspects of Juárez, but the city and its citizens are more complex than this reputation suggests. Show your students Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2009 TED Talk entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this 19-minute-long TED Talk, Ngozi warns listeners not to assume the “single stories” they have heard about a place encompass that place’s (and its citizens’) entire identity. Here are some questions/activities to help students apply “The Danger of a Single Story” to what they know about Juárez and connect insights to their own lives.

1. What is the “single story” most people know about Juárez?

2. Conduct research to find out more about Juárez. Pretend you are planning a trip there. What are some places you’d like to visit? What (if anything) surprises you about the positive things Juárez has to offer? What else can you find out about Juárez that adds knowledge beyond the “single story”?

3. What is a “single story” people believe about the place you are from? What do you wish people knew?
Where I’m from: Read George Ella Lyon’s famous poem, “Where I’m From.”

1. Discuss “Where I’m From.” What do students notice about the poem? It is made up of a list of experiences, but these experiences are very specific. Discuss specificity with students and note examples in the poem. How does the poem’s specificity help create a distinct sense of place? If the descriptions were more vague, how would that change the poem?

2. Use “Where I’m From” as a mentor text/model and ask students to create poems about where they are from. Ask students to make a list of personal, everyday experiences, describing each with language that is as specific as possible. So, instead of writing “I’m from dogs in the yard,” they might write, “I’m from chihuahuas in the yard, napping and yapping beneath shady mesquite trees.” Engage students in revising their poems. Ask them to circle lines that could be more specific, and keep brainstorming until their poems feel like they capture a distinct sense of place.

Optional: Have students keep a photo diary for a week, capturing very specific items/events from their life. Students can curate their pictures and present them as a photo essay or use their pictures for inspiration/illustration when writing their poems.

3. Have students visit and browse the “I am From Project” webpage at https://iamfromproject.com/, where they can read poems from contributors worldwide and contribute their own poems about where they are from.

   a. The “I am From Project” seeks to combat xenophobia. Ask students to define xenophobia. Engage them in discussion. How can knowing details about someone’s life help combat xenophobia?

b. Have students pick a character from The Everything I Have Lost and write a “Where I’m From” poem in their voice.

About the Author

Sylvia Zéleny is a bilingual author from Sonora, México. She has published short-story collections and novels in Spanish. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso, where she is currently a Visiting Writer. In 2016 she created CasaOctavia, a residence for women and LGBTQ writers from Latinamerica. Her Spanish works have received the Ciudad de La Paz Regional Story Award (Premio Regional de Cuento Ciudad de La Paz), the Emerging Narratives Award, and the Tamaulipas National Book Award (Premio Nacional de Novela Tamaulipas).
Reviews

“Zéleny’s lively novel, written in the form of a diary, captures Julia’s voice perfectly as she matures. Julia’s life is very different from most readers, but Zéleny’s approachable, inviting writing makes it resonant on a broad scale.”

—Booklist

“A girl experiences life on both sides of the US-Mexican border in Sylvia Zéleny’s daring middle grade novel...Nothing is revealed outside of the scope of Julia’s experience, yet the book feels complete...The Everything I Have Lost captures a girl’s blossoming understanding of violence, family dysfunction, and what it means to grow up.”

—Foreword Review

“Finally, English-language readers get to enjoy one of Mexico’s most important voices in contemporary fiction. Zéleny’s The Everything I Have Lost is a compelling story, effortless to follow, and often heartbreakingly beautiful. This is a story about life on the Mexico/U.S. border, and how discovering our voices can create meaning and give shape to the chaos of violence and randomness.”

—Daniel Chacón, author of Hotel Juárez

“Conveying the grim challenges Julia faces, Zéleny creates a fierce, funny, and full-of-feeling protagonist whose staccato diary entries pull the reader along.”

—Publishers Weekly

“Sylvia Zéleny makes her claim as one of the true contemporary voices to be heard on the US Mexican border. Her powerful stories are not to be missed and will hold canon for many young readers looking to identify with text for and by their own culture...The Everything I Have Lost is a beautifully sublime story of a young girl coming of age en la frontera.”

—Chelsea Villarreal, Latinx In Publishing

“The journal format is perfect and is sure to resonate with readers. You’re sucked right into Julia’s life.”

—Kim Baccellia, YA Books Central

“[A]n inherently riveting read that radiates a realism that engages the reader’s total engagement and absolute attention from first page to last.”

—Susan Bethany, Midwest Book Review

“Zéleny’s prose is poignant and piercing in its honesty and humanity. A story that readers will not soon forget.”

—Barbara Moon, Reading Style

“A beautiful and heartbreaking book—aching and wise—about a young teen coming of age en la frontera who writes in her journals about her desires, her fears, her family, and all those things lost and gained in growing up in a time and space marked by rising levels of violence.”

—Santiago Vaquera-Vasquez, author of One Day I’ll Tell You the Things I’ve Seen
Common Core Anchor Standards

READING:
Key Ideas and Details
1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
Craft and Structure
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

LANGUAGE:
Knowledge of Language
3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
6. Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

WRITING:
Text Types and Purposes
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
Production and Distribution of Writing
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
This curriculum guide was developed by a team of doctoral students at the Center for Children’s and Young Adult Literature (CCYAL) in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The CCYAL demonstrates a commitment to diversity in part by helping classroom teachers successfully integrate high-quality books featuring underrepresented characters, cultures, and settings. For further information or specific requests, please visit https://ccyal.utk.edu